CHAPTER VI

The rooms at the back had never seemed so quiet before as when, at the close of the day, he went into them. They seemed all the quieter by contrast with the excitement of the past hours. In the kitchen Mornin was giving the final touches to the supper, and in the room which was at once sitting-room and bedroom, the wooden cradle had fitted itself in a corner near the fireplace and wore an air of permanent establishment remarkable to contemplate when one considered how unlooked-for an incident it was.

On the threshold of this apartment Tom paused a moment. Such silence reigned that he could hear the soft, faint breathing of the child as it lay asleep. He stopped a second or so to listen to it. Then he stooped down, and began to loosen his shoes gently. As he was doing it, Mornin caught sight of him in passing the open door.

"Mars Tom," she said, "what's ye a-gwine fer to do?"

"I'm going to take them off," he answered, seriously. "They'll make too much noise."

The good soul in the kitchen chuckled.

"Now," she said, "now, Mars Tom, dar ye go right now a-settin' out to

ruinate a good chile, 'stead o' ustin' it ter things--a-settin' out ter ruinate it. Don't never tip aroun' fer no chile. Don't ye never do it, 'n' ye won't never haf ter. Tippin' roun' jest spiles 'em. Tell ye, Mornin never tipped roun' when she had em' ter raise. Mornin started out right from de fust."

Tom looked at the cradle.

"She'll rest easier," he said. "And so shall I. I must get a pair of slippers." And he slipped out of his shoes and stood ready to spend the evening in his stocking-feet. A solitary tallow candle stood upon the table, shedding its yellow light upon all surrounding objects to the best of its ability, and, seeing that its flickering brightness fell upon the small sleeper's face, he placed it at the farther end of the high mantel.

"She'll be more comfortable," he said. And then sat down feeling at ease with his conscience.

Mornin went back to her supper shaking her head.

"By de time she's a year old, dar won't be no managin' her," she said. "Da's allus de way wid de men folks, allus too hard or too soft; better leav' her to Mornin 'n' ust'n her to things right at de start."

There seemed little chance that she would be so "ustened." Having finished his supper, Tom carried his pipe and newspaper into the kitchen.

"I'll sit here awhile," he said. "The smoke might be too much for her, and the paper rustles so. We'd better let her have her sleep out."

But when the pipe was out and the last page of the paper read, he went back to his own room. The small ark stranded in his chimney corner was attractive enough to draw him there. It was a stronger attraction than it would have been to most men. He had always been fond of children and curious concerning them. There was not a child in the surrounding region who had not some remembrance of his rather too lavish good-nature. A visit to the Cross-roads was often held out as a reward for circumspect behaviour, and the being denied the treat was considered punishment heavy enough for most juvenile crimes.

"Ef ye'd had young uns of yer own, Tom, ye'd hev ruined them, shore," the secretly delighted matrons frequently remarked. "You'd let 'em run right over ye. I reckon ye keep that candy thar right a-purpose to feed 'em on now, don't yer?"

His numerous admirers, whose affection for him was founded on their enjoyment of his ponderous witticisms and the humour which was the little leavening of their unexciting lives, had once or twice during the past few days found themselves unprepared for, and so somewhat bewildered by, the new mood which had now and then revealed itself.

"It's kinder outer Tom's way to take things like he takes this; it looks

onnat'ral," they said.

If they had seen him as he drew up to the cradle's side, they would have discovered that they were confronting a side of the man of which they knew nothing. It was the man whose youth had been sore-hearted and desolate, while he had been too humble to realise that it was so, and with reason. If he had known lonely hours in the past eight years, only the four walls of the little back room had seen them. He had always enacted his rôle well outside; but it was only natural that the three silent rooms must have seemed too empty now and again. As he bent over the cradle, he remembered such times, and somehow felt as if they were altogether things of the past and not to trouble him again.

"She'll be life in the place," he said. "When she sleeps less and is old enough to make more noise, it will be quite cheerful."

He spoke with the self-congratulating innocence of inexperience. A speculative smile settled upon his countenance.

"When she begins to crawl around and--and needs looking after, it will be lively enough," he reflected. "She'll keep us busy, I daresay."

It was a circumstance perhaps worthy of mention that he never spoke of the little creature as "it."

"She'll need a good deal of looking after," he went on. "It won't do to

let her tumble around and take care of herself, as a boy might. We must be tender of her."

He bent forward and drew the cover cautiously over the red flannel sleeve.

"They think it a good joke, those fellows," he said; "but it isn't a joke with us, is it, young woman? We've a pretty big job to engineer between us, but I daresay we shall come out all right. We shall be good friends in the end, and that's a pretty nice thing for a lonely fellow to look forward to."

Then he arose stealthily and returned to the kitchen.

"I want you to tell me," he said to Mornin, "what she needs. I suppose she needs something or other."

"She needs mos' ev'rything, Mars Tom," was the answer; "seems like she hain't bin pervided fer 't all, no more 'n ef she was a-gwine ter be a youn' tukky dat de Lord hisself hed fitted out at de start."

"Well," said Tom, "I'll go to Barnesville to-morrow and talk to Judge Rutherford's wife about it. She'll know what she ought to have."

And, after a few moments given to apparently agreeable reflection, he went back to the room he had left.

He had barely seated himself, however, when he was disturbed by a low-sounding tap on the side door, which stood so far open as to allow of any stray evening breeze entering without reaching the corner of the chimney.

"Come in!" said Tom, not in a friendly roar, as usual, but in a discreetly guarded voice.

The door was pushed gently open and the visitor stood revealed, blinking with an impartial air at the light within.

"Don't push it wide open," said Tom; "come in if you are going to, and leave it as it was."

Mr. Stamps obeyed without making any noise whatever. It was one of his amiable peculiarities that he never made any noise, but appeared and disappeared without giving any warning, making himself very agreeable thereby at inopportune moments. He slipped in without a sound, deftly left the door in its previous position, and at once slipped into a chair, or rather took possession of one, by balancing himself on the extreme edge of it, arranging his legs on the lower bar with some dexterity.

"Howdy?" he said, meekly, having accomplished this.

Tom's manner was not cordial. He stretched himself, put his hands in his

pockets, and made no response to the greeting which was, upon the whole, a rather unnecessary one, as Mr. Stamps had been hanging about the post-office through the whole day, and had only wended his way homeward a few hours before.

"Want anything?" he enquired.

Mr. Stamps turned his hat around in his hands hurriedly.

"No, I don't want nothin', Tom," he said. Then, after a pause, he added, very softly:

"I jest thought I'd step in."

"Where are you going?" asked Tom.

The hat was turned round again.

"Whar wus I a-gwine?" deprecatingly. "Whar? Oh! I--I was a-gwine--I was a-gwine to Marthy's, I guess."

"You're pretty late," remarked Tom; "better lose no time; it's a pretty bad road between here and there."

"So 'tis," replied Mr. Stamps, apparently struck with the originality of

the suggestion. "So 'tis!" He appeared to reflect deeply for a few seconds, but suddenly his eyes began to wander across the room and rested finally upon the corner in which the cradle stood. He jerked his head towards it.

"It's thar, is it?" he enquired.

"Yes, she's thar," Tom answered, rather crustily. "What of it?"

"Oh! nothin', nothin', Tom, only it's kinder curi's--kinder curi's."

"Well," said Tom, "I've not begun to look at it in that light yet myself."

"Hain't ye, now?" softly. "Hain't ye, Tom?"

Then a faint little chuckle broke from him--not an intrusive chuckle, quite the contrary; a deprecatory and inadvertent sort of chuckle.

"That ain't me," he ventured, inoffensively. "I've been a-thinkin' it was curi's all along."

"That ain't going to hurt anybody," responded Tom.

"Lord, no!" quite in a hurry. "Lord, no! 'tain't likely; but it kinder int'rusted me--int'rusted me, findin' out what I did."

And he ended with a gently suggestive cough.

Tom thrust his hands deeper into his pockets and covered as large an area of floor with his legs as was possible without upsetting Mr. Stamps's chair and at the same time that stealthy little man himself.

"Oh! found out!" he replied, "Found out h----"

He checked himself with much suddenness, glancing at the cradle as he did so.

"What did you find out?" he demanded, unceremoniously, and with manifest contempt. "Let's hear."

Mr. Stamps coughed again.

"'Twan't much, mebbe," he replied, cautiously, "'n' then again, mebbe 'twas. It was kinder int'rusting, though. That--that thar was a good prayer o' his'n, warn't it?"

"Yes," admitted Tom, rather blusteringly. "I daresay it was; I suppose you are a better judge of prayers than I am."

"I'm a purty good judge on 'em," modestly. "I'd orter be, bein' a class-leader 'n' uster kinder critykisin'. I don't never do it much in

public myself, but I've allus critikised them as did. Thet sounded more professionaller then they air mostly--unless comin' frum them, as has bin raised to it."

"Did it?" said Tom.

"Yes, it was more professionaller."

Then he turned his hat again, setting it more carefully on his knee. He also fixed his eyes on Tom with a harmless smile.

"They wus North'ners."

Tom started, but managed to recover himself.

"You might have mentioned that before," he remarked, with sarcasm.

"I did," said Mr. Stamps, "along at the start, Tom; but ye wouldn't none on ye believe me."

Tom remembered that this was true, it having been Mr. Stamps who suggested the Northern theory which had been so unitedly scouted by his hearers at the time of its propounding.

"I h'ain't stayed as stiddy in North Car'lina as the rest on 'em," repeated Mr. Stamps. "When I was younger, I kinder launched out wunct. I

thought I could make money faster ef I wus in a more money-makin'er place, 'n' I launched out. I went North a spell 'n' was thar a right smart while. I sorter stedded the folks' ways 'n' I got to knowin' 'em when I seed 'em 'n' heerd 'em talk. I know'd her for one the minit I set eyes on her 'n' heern her speak. I didn't say nuthin' much to the rest on ye, 'cause I know's ye'd make light on it; but I know'd it wus jest that ar way with the Northerners."

"Well," said Tom, "it's valuable information, I suppose."

Mr. Stamps coughed. He turned his hat over and looked into its greasy and battered crown modestly.

"It mout be," he replied, "'n' then again it moughtent. It moughtent be if thar' wus nuthin' else to go 'long with it. They wus hidin' sumthin', ye know, 'n' they sot a heap on keepin' it hid. Ef a body know'd the whole thing from the start, thet'd be int'rustin', 'n' it 'ud be vallyable too."

"Valuable be d----" Tom began, but he checked himself once more on glancing at the cradle.

But Mr. Stamps was so far interested that he did not read the warning he might have read in the suddenly repressed outbreak. As he neared his goal he became a little excited and incautious. He leaned forward, blinking rapidly.

"They wasn't no man 'n' wife," he said. "Lord, no! 'N' ef the two as knowed most on 'em 'n' was kinder quickest at readin' signs 'd kinder go partners 'n' heve confydence in one another, 'n' sorter lay to 'n' work it out 'n' foller it up, it ud be vallybler than stores, or post-offices, or farms to both on 'em." And he leaned so far forward and blinked so fast that he lost his balance and almost fell off his chair.

It was Tom who saved him from his fall, but not from that tender consideration for his physical security which such an act would argue. Tom gathered up his legs and strode across to him almost before he had finished speaking. For the time being he had apparently forgotten the cradle and its occupant. He seized the little man by the back of his collar and lifted him bodily out of his chair and shook him as a huge mastiff might have shaken a rat, agitating the little legs in the large trousers with a force which gave them, for a few seconds, the most active employment.

"You confounded, sneaking, underhanded little thief!" he thundered. "You damned little scoundrel! You--you----"

And he bore him out of doors, set him struggling astride his mule which was cropping the grass, and struck that sagacious animal a blow upon her quarters which sent her galloping along the Barnesville Road at a pace which caused her rider to cling to her neck and body with arms and legs, in which inconvenient posture he remained, unable to recover himself, for

a distance of at least half a mile.

Tom returned to the back room in some excitement. As he crossed the threshold, he was greeted by a shrill cry from the cradle. He ruefully regarded the patchwork quilt which seemed to be struggling violently with some unseen agency.

"Doggone him!" he said, innocently, "he's wakened her--wakened her, by thunder!"

And he sat down, breathing heavily from his bodily exertion, and began to rock the cradle with a vigour and gravity which might have been expected to achieve great results, if Mornin had not appeared and taken his charge into her own hands.